

Your faith and the mission: Finding the delicate balance

By Sgt. Chad T. Jones

Today's diverse Army includes Soldiers from every religion. Some may attend religious services on Sundays, others on Saturdays and some may attend prayers everyday. While the Army has always been on the cutting edge of cultural and religious awareness, many NCOs may still be in the dark about the specific religious practices and needed accommodations for some of their Soldiers. In those

cases, the Soldier and NCO must work together to achieve an understanding that enables the Soldiers to accomplish their missions and still observe their religious practices, explained Chaplain's Assistant, Sergeant Maj. Marion Lemon of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas.

Religious accommodation is "a part of a Soldier's readiness and well being," said the U.S. Army Pacific Command's Islamic chaplain, Chaplain (Cpt.) Abdullah A. Hulwe. He recommended that NCOs practice a variation of a familiar phrase when dealing with Soldiers' religions. "NCOs need to know, be and do," Hulwe said, explaining that knowledge is vital when dealing with Soldiers' religious accommodations.

Understanding Soldiers' religious needs helps foster a strong working relationship between the NCO and the Soldier, according to Lemon.

"Allowing Soldiers to practice their religions has an impact on the mission and morale," Lemon explained. "If Soldiers see their NCO is allowing them the opportunity to worship, they will be more than happy to accomplish the mission."

The right for individuals to practice their religious beliefs is covered under the U.S. Constitution, Title X, as well as Army Regulation 600-20, *Army Command Policy*; Army Field Manual 1-05, *Religious Support*; and DA Pamphlet 600-75, *Accommodating Religious Practices*.

"The Army places a high value on the rights of its Soldiers to observe tenets of their respective religious faiths. The Army will approve requests for accommodation of religious practices unless accommodation will have an adverse impact on unit readiness,

individual readiness, unit cohesion, morale, discipline, safety, and/or health," said Chaplain (Maj.) Charles E. Reynolds, a World Religions instructor at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, Fort Bragg, N.C., quoting from AR 600-20, Chapter 5-6.

Reynolds emphasized that Soldiers have an obligation to communicate with their chain of command concerning their religious practices.

"The most important [thing] is for Soldiers to simply make their commanders aware of what those needs are," Reynolds explained.

Soldiers must realize their right to religious accommodations does not supercede the Army's need to accomplish the mission, Lemon said. On the other hand, commanders should support Soldiers who make legitimate requests to attend services at an alternate time that meets the mission and Soldier's needs.

For example, Christian Soldiers in a combat zone might not be able to attend traditional church services on Sundays.



Photos courtesy of Nella Hobson, U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School

A chaplain's assistant breaks down an altar in a containerized chapel, after a Catholic worship service in the field.

So, the command may arrange a more suitable time for services. "Combat chaplains often use the phrase, 'Every day is Sunday,'" said Reynolds. "That means services are held on whatever day the chaplain can get to the unit to perform services."

But some accommodations require advanced planning on the leader's part. Leader's books are a valuable tool NCOs can use to remind themselves of these accommodations. The Leader's book should include information on the Soldier's faith such as dates of religious holy days and dietary requirements, Lemon said.

There are now [Meals, Ready to Eat] that accommodate many different religions' dietary needs," explained the Training and Doctrine Command's Chaplain (Col.) Lilton J. Marks.

Specialty meals should be available to Soldiers who have special dietary needs. All it takes is a little advanced planning, said Marks. Once NCOs identify their Soldiers' specific dietary requirements, NCOs can go to their Supply NCO to request specialty meals.

In other cases, NCOs and Soldiers may need to work together to allow Soldiers time to participate in religious holidays. For example, the Jewish High Holy Days are in the fall and do not coincide with regularly scheduled days off. Other religious holidays are linked to the changes of the season, not a regularly scheduled date, Marks and Reynolds explained.

Another example is the Islamic month of Ramadan when Muslim Soldiers are required to refrain from food, water and other physical pleasures from sunrise to sunset. Practicing Muslims may be excused from physical fitness training, in accordance with the Department of the Army's Chief of Chaplains' and the local commander's guidelines.

Soldiers and NCOs who have questions or require clarification concerning a Soldier's religious practices

may speak with a chaplain or chaplain's assistant. But Marks reminds Soldiers that chaplains only advise leaders; it's ultimately a commander's decision when it comes to setting priorities.

"Soldiers and leaders need to know that the Army policy strongly supports religious accommodations," said Reynolds, who recalled something a retired brigade command sergeant major once told him concerning how far Army leadership will go to help Soldiers meet their religious needs.

"He said, 'Commanders and noncommissioned officers in leadership positions will bend over backwards to accommodate any religious practice, as long as it does not interfere with a Soldier's duty or the appearance of the Soldier's uniform.'"

Leaders must take time to understand their Soldiers' religious needs, and Soldiers must take time to know the Army guidance, Marks explained. Together they can broker a plan that ensures mission success and still provides for the Soldiers' spiritual needs.



Photos courtesy of Nella Hobson, U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School

Left: Chaplain offers communion for Soldiers. Center: Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Dennis Madtes provides comfort for Soldiers. Right: A Muslim chaplain prays during a training exercise.